

February 21, 2021

Testimony SUPPORTING

- **SB 753** An Act Concerning The Counting Of Incarcerated Persons For Purposes Of Determining Legislative Districts
- **HB 5312** An Act Restoring Electoral Privileges to Convicted Felons Who Are On Parole
- **HB 6578** An Act Concerning Participation in the Electoral Process
- **SB 1014**, An Act Concerning a Municipal Election Monitor for the 2021 Municipal and 2022 State Elections
- **SB 1017**, An Act Concerning Election Administration

Co-chairs Senator Flexer, Representative Fox, ranking members Senator Sampson and Representative Mastrofrancesco and the members of the GAE committee:

I respectfully submit testimony in my role as Director of the Nancy A Humphreys Institute for Political Social Work, Instructor in Residence at the UConn School of Social Work, and Fairfield resident in strong support of SB 753, HB 5312, HB 6578, SB 1014, SB 1017, which broadly seek to expand voting rights and access, including codifying automatic voter registration (AVR) at the Department of Motor Vehicles, retaining the successful and secure drop box system, and establishing an election monitor in large cities. I encourage you to expand AVR to other state agencies. I would like to use this opportunity to focus in on the issue of felony voting rights and population counts.

At the Humphreys Institute, we examine voting as a social determinate of health, a human right, and a powerful tool for shaping public policy. Voter participation is essential to a strong democracy, one that represents and responds to the needs of all citizens.

Felony disenfranchisement laws are an example of the structural racism built into our democracy. Though race neutral in their language, they were often written into state constitutions and statutes explicitly to limit the political power of African Americans and other marginalized groups. They were racist in their intent and their impact, which continues today. The unequal and disproportionate rates of criminal punishment by race and income continue to systematically reduce political power in minority communities (Behrens, Uggen & Manza, 2004; Manza & Uggen, 2006), including Connecticut's cities and low-income communities.

Today, Connecticut's law barring people on parole from voting is the most punitive in New England. We not only support expanding voting rights to those on parole like RI, MA and NH but strongly believe we should follow Vermont and Maine in allowing all citizens to vote. All forms of disenfranchisement undermine the legitimacy of a healthy democracy. Social workers know that the most useful question isn't simply "what did you do" but "what happened to you." When we remove the vote and voice of individuals, we fail to see them as stakeholders in building a better society.

Additionally, the way we count prisoners in our state leads to a dramatic distortion of political representation, reduces the political power of communities most impacted by the criminal justice system, and perpetuates inequalities in our state. Ten states have passed legislation to end prison-based gerrymandering and count incarcerated people at home for redistricting purposes, and many more are considering proposed legislation.

In my previous testimony to this Committee, I shared that the act of voting is good for people. Communities who vote are better off in important measures of wellbeing, and there are numerous studies showing that communities that vote in higher rates receive more attention and more resources from elected officials. As further proof of the power of voting, two studies, including one by the Florida Parole Commission, reported a significant drop in recidivism rates when formerly incarcerated persons had their voting rights restored (Florida Parole Commission study, 2010).

There are 20 million people in our country with a felony, and nearly 5 million are barred from voting. Harsh punishments for voting while ineligible and the confusing array of state-by-state restrictions has led to widespread defacto disenfranchisement. (Uggen, Larson & Shannon, 2016; Brennan Center, 2019). This is true for our state, too. Assisting people to register upon their release and removing the requirement that fines be paid, which is essentially a poll tax, would address wide-spread misinformation and empower people in their transition to the community.

Every state, including ours, should be supporting policies that allow people to vote safely, securely and easily.

I am happy to provide additional detail or research on these issues. Thank you for your time and consideration.

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